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INTRODUCTION TO CONSERVATION PLANNING FOR RMS's

Conservation planning is a natural resource problem solving and management process. The process integrates economic, social, and ecological considerations to meet private and public needs. This approach, which emphasizes desired future conditions, helps improve natural resource management, minimize conflict, and address problems and opportunities. The nine step planning process used by NRCS is discussed in detail in the National Planning Procedures Handbook (NPPH).

The first step in the planning process is an initial determination of the client's problems, opportunities, and concerns related to natural resources and human considerations within the planning area. Then the customer's objectives for the desired future conditions in the planning area is compared to existing resource conditions. Tools that can be utilized to document resource concerns include; Exhibit 1 "Checklist of Resource Problems" and NE-CPA-52 "Environmental Effects for Conservation Plans and Areawide Conservation Plans" found in the NPPH.

Resource inventories and an analysis of resource data are completed in steps three and four. The results of this analysis are compared to quality criteria to document the kind, amount, and extent of existing and potential resource problems.

A broad range of technically feasible conservation alternatives is developed with the client. Alternatives may include structural and management measures as well as measures that mitigate potential adverse impacts on the resources. The purpose of formulating alternatives is to provide the most effective, efficient, and economical conservation treatments that address resource concerns and are acceptable to the client in solving problems, addressing opportunities, and meeting the stated objectives.

The conservation alternatives are developed to a Resource Management System (RMS) level. A RMS is a combination of practices that, when installed, will meet or exceed established quality criteria for identified soil, water, animals, plants and air resource concerns for resource sustainability. The installation of the planned practices will provide for the long-term conservation, protection, and/or improvement of the resource base. When one or more of the resource concerns do not meet the minimum requirements for sustainability, planning is considered progressive. Progressive planning is when a client is ready, willing, and able to make some, but not all, of the decisions necessary to achieve an RMS level.

The customer then decides which alternative(s) to implement and the planner prepares the necessary documentation. As the conservation decisions are implemented, the customer may require technical assistance for installing conservation practices and obtaining permits, funding, surveys, final designs and inspections for structural practices. Conservation planning is an ongoing process that continues after the plan has been implemented. The last step in the planning process is evaluation of the implemented plan to determine if it is

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functioning as planned and if it is achieving the desired objectives. When the actual results differ from those anticipated, the information provides feedback into the planning process. The process of monitoring, evaluating, and experimenting in order to add to resource management information and modify decisions is known as adaptive management.

The challenge in conservation planning is to balance the short-term demands for production of goods and services with long-term sustainability of a quality environment. The success of conservation planning and implementation depends on the voluntary participation of clients and the development, implementation and evaluation of reasonable and sustainable resource management alternatives.

The Resource Management System formulation process is discussed in detail in the National Planning Procedures Handbook (NPPH).

The preplanning phase can involve the use of information found in the FOTG. These include:

- **General Resource References for Resource Planning:**

  Field office resource inventory and other supporting data are located in Section I of the FOTG.

  Site and soils information is found in Section II of the FOTG.

- **Conservation Practice Physical Effects (CPPE) Document:**

  The CPPE document is in Section V-A-1 and individual practice effects can be found in V-B-2 Other Effect Information of the FOTG.

- **Quality Criteria:**

  Quality Criteria are contained in Section III of the FOTG.

- **Guidance Documents:**

  Guidance documents are located in Section III of the FOTG. These documents are usually specific for a particular area, generally a county or a group of counties.

- **Section IV Practice Standards:**

  Section IV of the FOTG provides standards for applying practices including criteria to achieve specific purposes within each standard.

- **Conservation Effects for Decisionmaking:**

  Section V-B of the FOTG shows effects of applying practices in the RMS examples.

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INTRODUCTION TO QUALITY CRITERIA

Quality criteria establish the minimum treatment level necessary to adequately address the natural resource considerations that are identified during the planning process for the development of a Resource Management System (RMS). Resource concerns with established quality criteria are listed in Table 1 for each resource (Soil, Water, Air, Plants and Animals).

Not all resource concerns have quality criteria that can be quantified or have assessment tools that can measure changes in the resource. Table 1 “Quality Criteria”, identifies the resource concerns where quality criteria can be quantified and an assessment tool is available to measure changes in the resource. This table lists minimum treatment criteria for natural resource planning at the RMS level.

All resource concerns including those without established quality criteria are listed in the Checklist of Resource Problems or Conditions “Exhibit 1” in Part 600.5 of the exhibit section of the National Planning Procedures Handbook. This checklist provides planners with a comprehensive list of potential planning concerns. Form NE-CPA-52 “Environmental Effects for Conservation Plans and Areawide Conservation Plans” will be used to document that identified Resource concerns meet established quality criteria requirements. Resource concerns that are not listed in Table 1 **still need to be addressed** if they have been identified as a resource concern in step 1 of the planning process. Resource concerns correspond to the column headings found in the "Conservation Practices Physical Effects" (CPPE) matrix located in Section V of the Field Office Technical Guide (FOTG).

DEFINITIONS

NRCS Policy

NRCS policy on Resource Management System Quality Criteria and Guidance Documents can be found in Part 401 Technical Guides Title 450 of the General manual.

Benchmark Condition

The present condition or situation used as a point of reference to measure change in resource conditions resulting from conservation treatment.

Common Resource Areas

A geographical area where resource concerns, problems, and treatment needs are similar. Landscape conditions, soil, climate, human considerations, and other natural resource information are used to determine the geographical boundaries of the common resource area.

Conservation Management System

A combination of conservation practices and resource management that achieve a specific level of treatment of soil, water, air, plant, and/or animal resource concerns.

Conservation Plan

A record of the client’s decisions and supporting information, for treatment of a unit of land or water as a result of the planning process that meets the FOTG quality criteria for each natural resource (soil, water, air, plant, and animal),

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including economic and social considerations. A conservation plan includes decisions that meet the required level of treatment for a specific program or initiative if the client is made aware of alternative treatments, but is not ready to commit to a resource management system level of treatment. The plan describes the schedule of operations and activities needed to solve the identified natural resource concerns and problems.

Conservation Treatment

Any and all conservation practices, management measures, and works of improvement that have the purpose of alleviating resource concerns, solving or reducing the severity of natural resource use problems or taking advantage of resource opportunities.

Progressive Planning

A point in the planning process where the client is ready willing and able to make some but not all of the decisions necessary to achieve resource sustainability for soil, water air, plants and animals.

Quality Criteria

The treatment level required to achieve a resource management system for identified resource concerns for a particular land use.

Resource Management System

A conservation system that meets or exceeds the quality criteria in the FOTG for resource sustainability for all identified resource concerns for soil, water, air, plants and animals.

Resource Concern

A subset of a resource consideration that more specifically identifies or narrows the scope of analysis of a resource consideration. Assessment models/tools, direct measurements, observations and concerns identified by clients are utilized to identify concerns. Refer to Table 1 for resource concerns that have quality criteria established and Exhibit 1" in the NPPH for a complete list.

Resource Consideration

Elements or conditions of the natural resources that may be sensitive to change by natural forces or human activity.

Resource Problem

A condition related to one or more resource concerns that does not meet the minimum acceptable quality criteria shown in the FOTG, Section III.

Treatment Standards

Refers to the planned and/or applied conservation measures necessary to achieve quality criteria in the resources of concern. Resource quality criteria provide a "goal", while treatment standards provide the "means" by which to reach that goal. Treatment standards are the basis for RMS and serve as the measure of adequacy for planned treatment.

ESTABLISHMENT OF QUALITY CRITERIA

In the establishment of criteria, the following basic rules were followed for consistency and uniformity.

1. Quality Criteria statements reflect a minimally acceptable CONDITION of the resource. Quality Criteria are quantifiable and have a tool to provide measurement. All resource

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concerns that may be addressed during the planning process may not have established quality criteria.

2. Established criteria represent a MINIMUM level that is acceptable for a resource or resource concern. Because resource concerns, as written in policy, are problem oriented, criteria in effect state the acceptable level of change in a resource.

3. Quality Criteria are quantifiable. Terms for criteria must state clearly *"when enough is enough",* so that planners know when planned treatment is adequate.

4. Quality Criteria levels must be ATTAINABLE with current technology and approved conservation practices.

5. Quality Criteria relate directly to a RMS PLANNING level.

6. Quality Criteria of the resource represents a level that SUSTAINS the use and productivity of the resource indefinitely. There may be some negative short term effects on the resources to obtain the long term positive effects.

7. Quality Criteria levels should be USABLE, MEASURABLE, and/or RECOGNIZABLE.

APPLICATION OF QUALITY CRITERIA

Quality Criteria establishes the minimum treatment level necessary to adequately address the resource concerns identified during the planning process for the development of a RMS.

The RMS criteria are met when treatment has been planned that, when applied, will resolve all of the identified resource problems (concerns) according to the Quality Criteria. The RMS will be considered applied when all of the conservation practices that make up the system have been installed, implemented or applied according to Practice Standards and Specifications in Section IV of the FOTG.

In some instances, actions by individual decisionmakers cannot solve the resource concerns because it involves more than one decisionmaker. In these instances, group planning, project measures or utilization of several programs may be required to meet the respective Quality Criteria. In cases where the decisionmaker can not solve the problem as an individual, quality criteria will be met when the land under the control of the decisionmaker does not contribute to the problem.

The use and implementation of these criteria will be consistent with federal, state, local laws and regulations.